

The Four Block Model and Balanced Literacy Programs:
A Potential Truce for the "Reading Wars"

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Peggy Rice". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with some loops and flourishes.

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Abstract

There exists in education a debate over what method of teaching reading to children is best. This has led to a conflict in education known as the "reading wars." They have divided a country's education system between whole language and phonics. However, there is a new solution waiting in the wings: a balanced literacy program.

"Stop the "reading wars." Nothing has hurt our profession more than the oversimplified phonics versus whole language disagreements. The divisive tactics and extreme discourtesies by a few on both sides have victimized learners for more than a century. It's essential to find common ground." (Bradley, 1998)

When I began writing this thesis, I had no idea what this sliver of text meant. I had intended to write about the advantages of using authentic texts over basal readers. However, as I did research on authentic texts, the debate on reading instruction became more and more prominent. I knew that I had to understand this debate before I could explore the advantages of authentic texts over basal readers.

I wondered what all of the tension in reading instruction was about. I discovered that the root of this tension lied much deeper within the scheme of reading education. I found myself researching in the middle of what has been called the Great Debate and "The Reading Wars."

After reading many articles about these reading wars, I ran across the term "balanced literacy programs." Indeed, I was to hear that phrase again as I sat in a college classroom learning about reading instruction. Suddenly, the term was everywhere. I saw the value of a balanced literacy program in its abstract form; however, I

had no idea if it could be feasibly applied in a classroom situation.

I was fortunate enough to be placed for student teaching in a school system that was piloting one of these balanced literacy programs called Four Blocks. I had an opportunity to work with students as they explored their literacy, as well as to receive feedback from the teachers about the way the program worked in their classrooms. Six months later, I have a clearer image of what it all means and how balanced literacy programs can and do support readers.

History

For the last forty years, the United States has concerned itself with the debate between using strictly phonics to teach reading or using another method, such as whole language. Upon examination of the two methods, I discovered that I was taught to read in a method that was largely phonetic. Much of the reading instruction that I received as a child focused on the relationships between the letters and the sounds that they represent. However, the last decade has seen reading education swing like a pendulum between a curriculum grounded in phonics into a phonics-free curriculum (Defee, Hall, & Cunningham, 1998).

During the early and middle years of the 1990s, there was a push for a reading approach called "whole language." Whole language is a meaning-based approach that emphasizes comprehension and uses whole texts (Asselin, 1999). In many parts of the country, these meaning-based programs began to replace skill-based programs such as traditional basal reading approaches.

However by 1998, the so-called "reading wars" came to a climax. There were many publications dedicated to the debate, and public interest peaked. Some states, most notably California, opted for drastic changes and reverted back to a largely phonics-based curriculum (Asselin, 1999). Other states waited to see what would emerge from this controversy over the reading curriculum. What emerged was an idea of balanced reading instruction.

Balanced reading instruction proposed the idea that reading and writing should be taught together in context. Instead of isolating words and sentences, students would learn to read them and to decode while they were involved with the text.

Piloting one of the first approaches to balanced reading was the small pacific country of New Zealand. In the 1980s, the reading programs there were based on the concept of "balanced reading programmes" (Reutzel, 1998).

These programs were not simply a balance between whole language and phonics; in fact, the program addressed many more aspects of reading program design. Balanced reading programmes looked at variables like environmental design, reading processes, community building, and motivation (Reutzel, 1998). Not long after, the United States began adapting their reading education curriculum to loosely mimic what New Zealand had done.

Soon many states were pushing what they called the "whole language approach." Schools eliminated the phonics instruction that had been so strongly emphasized in the 1970s and 1980s and moved to teaching reading and writing through the use of whole texts. Instead of isolating the letter-sound relationships, students were supposed to absorb those relationships through the constant exposure to words and texts. Skills that would have been taught in isolation were now taught through a series of mini-lessons within the chosen texts. It was only after schools experienced success that they began to describe New Zealand's balanced literacy programs as "whole language programs" (Reutzel, 1998).

The downfall of the whole language movement came in 1994 when the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) published the results of their national test (Defee,

Hall, and Cunningham, 1998). Some states that had been using whole language, including California, scored low. The result was the use of the whole language as a scapegoat (Asselin, 1999). States began to look for another reading approach. In 1996, California was the first state to use the phrase "balanced literacy instruction" (Asselin, 1999) to describe their new curriculum.

This balanced literacy approach was founded on two underlying principles. One was that "phonics is foundational to comprehension and higher order thinking skills and needs to be taught systematically and explicitly" (Asselin, 1999). The second stated that: "instruction is composed of regular but separate periods of explicit skills instruction and literature based experiences" (Asselin, 1999). What has evolved since California began its push for phonics has escalated the Reading Wars to an entirely new level.

At an International Reading Association conference in October of 1999, some of the attendees (teachers, administrators, reading specialists, and reading researchers) wore black T-shirts with the words "Banned in California" printed on them (Flipppo, 1999). In California, specialists who had a whole language based philosophy were not allowed to do in-service workshops in that state.

Instead, only those program facilitators who emphasized the letter-sound relationships, or phonics, were allowed to present workshops in that state (Flipppo, 1999). Now that California has adopted its phonics based "balanced literacy program," a new debate has emerged: what is "balance?" Is what California calls a balanced literacy program really balanced?

California and the Great Debate

In June of 1996, the Los Angeles Weekly ran an article that was distributed and reprinted in newspapers around the state. It read:

"But whole language, which sounds so promising when described by its proponents, has proved to be a near disaster when applied to—and by—real people. In the eight years since whole language first appeared in the state's grade schools, California fourth-grade reading scores have plummeted to near the bottom nationally according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Indeed, California's fourth graders are now such poor readers that only the children of Louisiana and Guam—both hampered by pitifully backward education systems—get worse reading scores" (Weaver, 1998).

This article spawned uproar in California that led to dramatic legislation and changes in the instruction of elementary reading. Gone were the holistic practices that were in place. Two new bills dubbed the "ABC" bills, outlined program changes that replaced whole language.

These bills "require systematic, explicit phonics, spelling, and basic computational skills" (Weaver, 1998). These became the foundations for a new literacy initiative: the balanced literacy program.

Since California began this program, there have been a wide variety of definitions for balanced literacy. Some researchers believe that "meaning-based and skills-based approaches constitute the elements of balance." Still others believe that balanced literacy is an "account of everything we know from both approaches [meaning-based and skills-based] and an attempt to give equal attention to all" (Asselin, 1999).

There is neither an obvious or clear definition, nor a definite outline for a balanced reading program. As I did my research and had a chance to observe in an elementary classroom, I began to develop my own working definition for balanced literacy programs. I feel that balanced literacy programs take the best from holistic and phonics-based approaches. It also encompasses all five areas of the language arts: reading, writing, listening, speaking, and visual interpretation. Finally, I believe that these programs should also be flexible enough to adapt to the learning needs of the children in the classroom.

What effect do balanced literacy programs have on emerging readers? Are they conducive to their learning?

Emerging Readers: Testing the Balance

As an early childhood educator, I am interested in how this balanced approach will affect emerging readers. Emergent readers are those readers who are learning concepts of print applicable to the reading process. Such concepts include phonemic awareness, letter-symbol identification, and basic knowledge about print.

Emergent literacy begins when a child begins to experience the uses of print, and ends as children are able to read and write for their own purposes (McGee & Purcell-Gates, 1997). Children who have been read to before starting school often have the kinds of knowledge about print that are necessary to develop into reading skills. Examples of these concepts are: knowledge that the text on the page represents the words, and that these words make up a story, knowledge that the illustrations on a page support the text that is written, and knowing that reading and writing of print flows from left to right in the English language. Children who lack the exposure to print before school are often found to struggle when trying to learn how to read. In theory, a balanced literacy program will

support not only those emerging readers who have background knowledge about print, but will also assist those children who are struggling with those ideas.

The Four Block Model: A Possible Solution

In 1990, a framework began to emerge with the goal of balancing whole language and phonics in a way that would enable as many children to learn as possible. Three teachers in South Carolina set out to "figure out how to provide reading instruction to children with a wide range of entering levels without putting them in fixed ability groups." The approach they began has become known as Four Blocks (Defee, Hall, & Cunningham, 1998).

When they designed the framework for this program, the teachers had two initial goals: the first was to "meet the needs of children with a wide range of the entering ability groups." The second was to avoid the pendulum swing between the phonics- based and whole language reading programs (Allington & Cunningham, 1994).

The developers proposed that the solution was a blend of theories. Instead of asking, "Which approach?" educators should be asking, "How can we organize the classroom so that we 'have it all'?" The authors proposed spending 2 ¼ to 2 ½ hours each day on 4 areas of language

arts instruction: word building (also known as word wall), guided reading, writing, and self-selected reading (Allington & Cunningham, 1994).

They first implemented their framework in a single first grade classroom. They chose a school that had a diverse student population with diverse socioeconomic conditions as well. The scores in the classroom across a five-year span were remarkably consistent. Most of the children were reading at grade level or above. Those reading below grade level, at the primer or pre-primer stage, only constituted ten to seventeen percent of the group (Defee, Hall, & Cunningham, 1998).

In 1996, the program had expanded to more than one classroom in several schools. The authors of the model decided to test its effectiveness in teaching literacy and tested 100 students from the Four Block classrooms and also chose 100 students who were being taught through traditional methods. These students were given parts of the Basic Reading Inventory. The results favored those children who were involved in the Four Blocks classrooms.

Wary of the results and of possible teacher bias, the children in the Four Block model were retested and consistently scored above those students in traditional literacy programs (Cunningham, 1999).

The result? "On the basis of the standardized test data, school officials concluded that the Four Blocks framework had been much more effective than their previous ability-grouped traditional basal instruction" (Defee, Hall, & Cunningham, 1998).

The Four Block Model in Grade 3

During my student teaching experience, I had a chance to observe and teach a Four Block classroom in the third grade. Immediately, I was struck by the vast differences in reading abilities that had emerged in these children. No longer were there primarily emerging readers and non-readers; instead there seemed to be a graduation of reading levels from non-readers to those reading well above grade level. The question that came to my mind was "How can this program support all of these readers at their varying levels so that they continue to develop into lifelong readers?" I found that the Four Block model answered the question.

I liked the fact that the model stressed that students not be placed in ability grouping: rather, the students are allowed to proceed at their own pace, while still obtaining the necessary skills to improve their reading no matter

what level they are reading at. In order to illustrate this, I have chosen to examine each block individually.

The Word Wall Block: Making Words

I conducted an anonymous survey of the primary teachers in the elementary school where I student taught to ascertain the opinions of those who worked closest with the program. The word wall block is one of the most beneficial aspects of the Four Block program, according to the teachers. The students engage in activities that take the place of traditional spelling lessons. One of the many activities that the developers of the Four Block model suggest is called "rhyming words." The children are given a word ending, such as "oan" and then asked to come up with as many words to fit that pattern as possible. As correct responses are given, the children's responses are recorded onto a sheet of paper or the chalkboard and the teacher begins to emphasize that some words belong to the same word-ending group. The teacher assists the children in coming up with as many words as possible and encourages the children to write them down as a reference.

Another activity that children participate in as part of the word wall activities is called "word hunts and sorts." This phonics-related game stresses the different

sounds that vowels might represent. It takes more than one class time to complete, but the children seem to enjoy it because it is a self-checking activity. After being given a set of example words, the children listen to words that the teacher pronounces. The children then select the spelling pattern they believe the word follows. The teacher acknowledges a student who volunteers the correct response and then writes it on the overhead or chalkboard in the under the correct spelling.

The most popular activity for the word wall among the children in my class was the "word wall cheering." Each morning, a leader would be chosen to chant or cheer three words off of the word wall. Most of the words have some type of motion that go along with them. For example, a third-grade word wall word is question. The children spell the word q-u-e-s-t-i-o-n while making the question mark symbol in the air. Many teachers have noticed that the children are making fewer spelling mistakes because many of the high frequency words are word wall words that get practiced often.

Writing Block

The writing block gives teachers the most freedom, among the four components of Four Blocks, to

decide what and how they want to teach. Some primary teachers prefer to use writing time as an opportunity for the students to write in journals or notebooks. Others use the time to teach writing skills that might be found in conjunction with their basal readers and language activity books. I have observed, at all levels, teachers emphasizing the writing process and encouraging their students to share and publish their works.

Guided Reading

The guided reading portion of the Four Block model seems to parallel the basal reading program. In fact, the school system where I student taught had two years yet in their current basal program before new materials could be adopted. This meant that most teachers were teaching from the basal and trying to work in the components of the Four Block framework. I think that in the future, authentic texts could be implemented in place of the basal readers. Having said that, it should be noted that the third grade basal program I worked with and observed was a collection of authentic texts compiled into a single volume.

SSR: A Time to Enjoy the Reading Process

As an educator, I found self-selected reading, or SSR, to be the most enjoyable time of the day. It was during this time that the students applied what they knew. This time was also a chance for the teacher to conference one-on-one with the students. The procedure that my classroom followed looked something like this:

10 Minutes: Teacher reads aloud to classroom
15 Minutes: Individual conferences and
 silent reading.

The students were able to read whatever they choose during this time, and were allowed to visit the classroom library to select another book or type of material to read.

Building Blocks and Emerging Readers

During my student teaching, I also had an opportunity to observe kindergarten students as they worked to learn to read. Some of the children were reading when I got there; some had been reading since before school began. Other children were still struggling to learn and apply concepts about print. The program, called Building Blocks, seemed to support the children's efforts, no matter what level of reading development they exhibited.

Building Blocks emphasized the concepts of print that were earlier discussed, such as: knowledge that the text on the page tells the story and that reading and writing of print flows from left to right in the English language. While some of the activities and skills are similar to those taught in the Four Block reading model, Ms. Cunningham, one of the teachers who developed the Four Block program, stresses that it not the same. The Building Blocks model is intended to give students the necessary background and skills that they need to begin reading. Some of these skills include phonemic awareness, recognition of rhyme patterns, and recognition of patterns in general.

As I watched the children in the kindergarten classroom, I was impressed by what I saw. The children were constantly immersed in reading and writing activities. In the mornings, the children alternated between reading books of their own choosing and writing short entries in their journals. The materials available for the children to choose from were diverse. Brochures, magazines, class-compiled books, and simple picture books were all included. The children enjoyed this time, especially looking at and reading the books that they made as a class.

Writing time brought about an interesting attitude among the children. Some children enjoyed time to write. Most days, the children were given the opportunity to write about whatever topic they chose. The developers of the reading model emphasize that children need choices about what they read and write. Many students simply represented their thoughts in written form by drawing a picture. Some would also label the pictures with a few words that they knew.

Throughout the day, different reading activities took place. One example is a morning message. On a consistent basis (several times a week), the teacher would write a message to the students on large paper. A sample message might look like this:

Dear Class,
Today we have all new centers. I
know you will love them!
Love,
Miss Knight

As the teacher wrote this message, the students used the skills and knowledge that they possessed to "read" the message. Some students actually read it, while others use the clues from the other students. When the entire message had been read, the teacher had the children count letters, count words, find the greeting, find the closing, look for

rhyme, etc. The students worked with this message to apply skills that they have been learning.

Another important part of the kindergarten reading curriculum that I observed was the use of Big Books. At the kindergarten level, most were repetitious and had elements of rhyme. The children were able to detect the pattern and after a few pages, were able to read most of it with the teacher. In the self-selected reading baskets, there were smaller copies of the big books and the children often attempted to obtain a copy to read. They were favorites for the children because they enabled them to feel successful as readers.

I was also given the opportunity to observe a teacher in-service for Building Block instruction. It was given in conjunction with the first grade teachers' in-service on the beginnings of the Four Block model. I was interested to see the well-planned transitions between the two models, and how they were indeed different, yet were interrelated. The same elements were present to some degree in the Building Blocks model, but were not as regimented.

I have observed and implemented both the Building Block and Four Block reading models. During my brief stay in the classrooms, I felt that the program was highly successful. I saw its strengths in two areas in

particular: the first is its ability to support readers at any level from non-readers to emerging readers to fluent readers. The second strength that I saw was a clear progression of skills from not only one grade level to another, but from one block to another. It allowed each teacher to teach at their own pace yet assured that all skills were covered.

I felt confident in the models' abilities to reach and teach many children literacy skills after a few weeks, but I wondered how educators that had been using it for the entire school year felt. I decided to ask.

Feedback: The Teachers Talk

I sent out a survey to the teachers in grades kindergarten, first, second, and third grade. On it, I asked five questions relating to the strengths and weaknesses of the program. The questions were as follows:

1. What do you see as the Four Block/ Building Block program's strengths?
2. Weaknesses?
3. What block or aspect of this program seems to be the most beneficial, and why?
4. What would you change about the current Four Block/Building Block program?
5. What has been your overall impression of this program? Is it something that you see it as an improvement over other programs that you have done?

When the surveys were returned, my initial thoughts about the teachers' feelings were validated. Most of the teachers felt that the Four Block model was an improvement over previous programs. What I found to be interesting was that while all of the teachers concurred that it was better than some other models they had used, several felt that this method was designed to facilitate older methods of teaching. For example, one teacher wrote, "My impression is that it is a great program, but that all it does is take information that has been around for years and package it better." Another teacher had this to say; " I see this as working better than other methods because it is an organized grouping of old methods to involve all areas of language arts instead of teaching each area separately." It surprised me to see that the teachers using the program felt that they were using older methods. I supposed, erroneously, that because the Four Block model was fairly current, the methods and activities within it were new also.

I asked the teachers to list the aspect of the Four Block system they felt was the model's greatest strength. No two surveys came back with the same definitive answer. Some teachers chose to mention that the organization was

its greatest strength. Several educators said that they felt the best thing about the Four Block model was that it addressed all of the learning styles and ability levels each day in the way that it was designed to be taught. One teacher wrote this about the strengths of the Four Block model, "It is balanced and includes all aspects of reading instruction. It is multilevel and meets the children at their own reading level." This statement further validated my theory that the Four Block model does seem to fit the description of truly "balanced" reading instruction.

While the strengths ranged from individual blocks to its ability to instill "phonemic awareness and instruction," it is not without fault. I also asked the teachers to list the weaknesses of the Four Block system. Unlike the strengths that the educators listed, there seemed to be a definite response to the weaknesses: time. With all of the other instruction that teachers are required to provide during the day, it is often difficult to schedule in the 2 hours that the authors of the model recommend be spent in language arts each day (Cunningham, 1999). The model suggests devoting thirty minutes on each block each day, particularly in the upper grades. In the lower grades, primarily kindergarten and first grade, the

teachers have adapted the model to fit the needs and attention spans of their classroom.

Other weaknesses that teachers mentioned included the need for supplementation by a basal program for guided reading and mini-lessons, the loss of time for creativity and individuality within the lessons taught, "difficulty keeping top kids challenged," and even in some cases, the teachers themselves. Those teachers working with the Building Blocks model mentioned that it is designed more for an all-day program, as it "doesn't address ½ day programs or teachers without aides."

The overall response to the Four Block model at this elementary school has been very positive. The students appear to enjoy what they are doing, and are actively engaged in learning material that has been tiresome and tedious in the past.

I truly feel that the Four Block model meets the criteria to be considered a balanced reading program. I find my support in this statement made by a teacher who is using the model in her own classroom: "That's the point of Four Blocks. It's balanced and includes all components of reading instruction." Not only does it focus on reading, writing, speaking, listening, and visual interpretation, but also strives to balance phonics and whole language

philosophies. The result is a school full of primary-aged students who want to improve their skills and who are finding more success than they have ever dreamt possible.

The balanced reading program ideals demonstrated by the Four Block system have seemed a great victory in the "reading wars." However, I was curious as to how well the current proficiency guide in Indiana supported a balanced reading initiative on a statewide level.

Indiana and Balanced Literacy Programs

Indiana's state language arts proficiency guide for elementary is divided into two categories: Primary and Upper Elementary students. Primary covers grades K-2, and upper then covers grades 3-5. The discussion in this section will focus on the primary-aged proficiencies.

There are eight proficiencies, with several specific skills listed under each proficiency.

Proficiency one says that students will, "exhibit a positive attitude toward language and learning through..." (Indiana Department of Education, 2000) and then lists several examples. I believe that this proficiency is easily met through my own observations and the feedback I received from the teachers about the model. One teacher wrote, "All children see themselves as readers and

writers." If a student perceives themselves as a reader or writer, they have a better attitude about what they are learning.

Proficiency two states that students should, "select and apply effective strategies for reading..." (Indiana Department of Education, 2000) that include using semantic, syntactic, and phonetic cues to decode meaning in texts. I feel that this also supports the balanced literacy model. These skills are essential no matter what kind of reading instruction is being given to the students. Certainly, the necessary strategies are taught within the Four Block model that we examined.

The third proficiency states that students should "comprehend developmentally appropriate materials" (Indiana Department of Education, 2000). This proficiency seems rather vague, yet still is supportive of the balanced literacy model. In its specifications for grades K-2, the proficiency guide lists materials such as signs and labels, picture books, nursery rhymes and charts. A balanced literacy program would, ideally, also include these types of materials as well.

Writing skills were emphasized in the Four Block model discussed earlier, and those skills are essential to any literacy program looking to balance all areas of the

language arts. Indiana language arts proficiency four also supports writing abilities. It states that students should be able to "select and use developmentally appropriate strategies for writing" (Indiana Department of Education, 2000). Proficiency five also deals with writing skills, emphasizing students should be able to, "write for different purposes and audiences producing a variety of forms" (Indiana Department of Education, 2000).

Proficiency six deals with the use of "prior knowledge and content area information to make critical judgments" (Indiana Department of Education, 2000). Making predictions and categorizing are listed just two of the specific abilities listed for grades K-2. This proficiency, would in my opinion, support most literacy models.

Listening and speaking skills, two of the most often neglected language arts skills, are covered in proficiency seven. It states that students should be able to "communicate orally with people of all ages" (Indiana Department of Education, 2000). Its primary skills are listening, asking and answering questions, and sharing ideas. These are fundamental to a balanced literacy program of any type.

The final proficiency in the Indiana Proficiency Guide is aimed at ensuring students are well rounded. It states that students should be able to "recognize the interrelatedness of language, literature, and culture" (Indiana Department of Education, 2000). In this, it lists the area of visual representation (art, dance, signs, etc.) that is missing from some literacy programs. It further serves to complete the final area of a balance literacy program.

Indiana is more than adequate, in its proficiencies, to support a balanced literacy program. It makes provisions for reading, writing, listening, speaking, and visual representation. I found it interesting that the state of Indiana leaves the schools in charge of deciding what kind of language arts program to implement; they made no mention of educational strategy preferences within the Proficiency Guide.

The Future of Balanced Literacy Programs

"We need a voice crying out for the powerful initiative we need to bring literacy to all children at every age and [a voice] clearly stating the magnitude of change needed to reach our goal" (Joyce, 1999). Literacy in the United States has become a struggle: A struggle of

methods, a struggle of theories, and a struggle between teachers and legislators. There seem to be no easy solutions or right answers to the Great Debate; no easy resolutions to the "reading wars."

I believe that the Four Block model exemplifies the characteristics of a balanced literacy program, and I believe that teachers who use these programs are giving their students the best opportunities to learn to read and write. While there will never be a single, satisfactory answer to the question of "Which approach?" I feel that Mr. Allington and Ms. Cunningham (1994, p. propose an attainable solution:

We always seem to be searching for the single quick fix that will solve the problems of American schools. We mandate, bandwagon, proselytize, alienate, and continue our ever-reforming educational innovations. Perhaps it is time for us to realize that:

1. There is no quick fix.
2. We have actually learned quite a lot about schooling and teaching reading to all children.
3. Achieving literacy for all children isn't such a simple matter that it can be blamed on the method of teaching when it does not succeed, even though this is about the only factor that we ever debate.

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